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Subject:	COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Reviewed EU rural action plan Accompanying the document Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward

Delegations will find attached document SWD(2024) 451 final.

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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Reviewed EU rural action plan

Accompanying the document

Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions

The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward

{COM(2024) 450 final} - {SWD(2024) 450 final}

Action title	Expected start date ¹	Implementation status	Description ²
Stronger rural areas			
Flagship: Set up a rural revitalisation platform	2022/2023	Completed (launched on 29/06/2023) and continuing	<p>The rural revitalisation platform is a one-stop shop for rural communities, rural project holders and local authorities alike to collaborate. It predominantly supports rural areas affected by population loss, ageing and a lack of economic opportunities, by sharing information and best practices on tools and strategies. It is integrated as a special focus of the broader Rural pact community platform.</p> <p>The platform promotes LEADER, smart villages, Interreg and integrated territorial strategies with a view to making rural areas more attractive and making services accessible to all. It links up with the pilot action ‘Small places matter’ under the Territorial Agenda and the ‘Smart Rural 21’ and ‘Smart Rural 27’ projects to develop smart village approaches.</p>
Flagship: Research and innovation for rural communities	2021	Ongoing since June 2021	<p>Research and innovation activities support the development of innovations by and for rural communities as well as training and knowledge exchange to accelerate the spread and adoption of these innovations. These are funded through dedicated topics within relevant parts of Horizon Europe work programmes and calls, mentioning the contribution of the project to the rural vision, favouring the active participation of rural stakeholders in projects and inviting beneficiaries to liaise with the rural pact when relevant.</p> <p>The development of rural innovation ecosystems and connections between rural innovation actors across the EU is supported by i) dedicated actions under the European Innovation Partnership for agriculture through workshops and focus groups and ii) the set-up and operation of the European Startup Village Forum through analysis of factors triggering rural innovation and engagement work with rural startups, enhancing connections between rural innovation actors across the EU.</p> <p><i>This flagship includes the action “Analyse spatial mobility in demographically declining areas in Europe”, delivered through Horizon Europe projects, included under the “resilient” part of the EU Rural action plan in the 2021 version: The Commission will analyse the drivers of demographically declining and left behind areas in Europe, and will examine the demographic, economic, social, labour market and cultural effects of urban-rural mobility in both sending and receiving areas. It also aims to promote rural development, sustainability and socio-economic equality.</i></p>

¹ As foreseen in the EU rural action plan adopted on 30 June 2021 and annexed to the communication on the long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas (COM(2021)345 final)

² All actions represent the intention of the Commission at the date of adoption but delivery may have to be reconsidered in light of available resources.

Enhanced networking for LEADER/CLLD and Smart Villages.	2021	Ongoing since June 2021	Over the past 30 years, communities have been empowered to develop local strategies with CAP funding under the LEADER approach, which has been extended to other funds through so-called Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). Enhanced networking strengthens these approaches, along others such as Smart Villages and sustainable coastal communities, and provides advice to stakeholders involved in the governance systems of these initiatives, notably on better, smarter, more inclusive strategies, simpler delivery systems and improving the delivery of intangible benefits such as increased social capital and improved quality of local governance.
Develop a study on land use linked to sustainable farming.	2022	Started in July 2023 and ongoing	The Commission launched a study on land use linked to sustainable farming. The study, which should be completed by the end of 2024, will provide a comprehensive analysis of the main impacts of sectoral developments (agricultural, forestry, energy, protection of natural areas, protection of water, urban sprawl and infrastructure, climate action, mining, consumption patterns, etc.) on land use in the EU's rural areas. It will also identify recommendations for optimal land use, in particular to promote sustainable farming in light of other demands on land.
Support education, training, youth, sport and volunteering activities in rural areas	2021	Completed & continuing	<p>Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes (2021-2027) are reaching more people in rural areas through inclusion measures covering all fields of education, training, youth, sport and volunteering such as: i) specific financial mechanisms; ii) targeted communication activities; iii) easier-to-access mobility and cooperation activity formats, iv) expanded set of digital measures (particularly suited for cooperation and initiatives at local and regional level), and v) training and networking opportunities.</p> <p>The EU-CoE Youth Partnership works on rural youth under the priority “young people in rural areas”. Based on the work plan 2024-2025, the partnership will present research on rural youth, exploring how young people living in rural areas access opportunities (non-formal learning, active citizenship, and participation at local, regional, national and European levels), analysing promising practices, existing tools and youth friendly frameworks, and providing guidance for policy makers on how to expand opportunities for young people in rural areas.</p>

Connected rural areas			
Flagship: Develop rural mobility through (1) support to rural municipalities in identifying best practices (2) multimodal digital mobility services	2021	Ongoing since December 2022 (launch of SMARTA-NET)	<p>It is imperative to improve existing transport connections. To this end, sustainable multimodal mobility solutions and connections should be optimised, making use of digitalisation. Building on its experience with urban mobility networks, the Commission supports rural municipalities in discussing and identifying mobility solutions through the SMARTA NET project. The network showcases local level initiatives which local authorities could replicate in their territory and provides a forum for discussion on rural mobility issues.</p> <p>Improving connections between road, rail, waterways, and air transport can make them more accessible to rural areas. Digital platforms should also be used to create multimodal real-time information, ticketing or booking services, allowing people to easily reach their final destination through the most sustainable mode of transport.</p>
Flagship: Rural Digital Futures	2021	Ongoing since June 2021	<p>1. Digital connectivity: closing the gaps between rural and urban areas and enabling universal and affordable access to high-speed broadband, including 5G. This is achieved by mobilising private-sector investments through complementary public funding from national and European sources, notably from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF).</p> <p>2. Digital technology: digital innovation and new technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, Internet of Things solutions and Digital Innovation Hubs contributing to the development of rural areas by implementing the actions of Europe’s digital decade. European programmes such as Horizon Europe and the Digital Europe Programme is mobilised to support innovation and deployment of digital capacities.</p> <p>3. People (“human capital”): boosting competencies needed for the digital transformation of rural areas, including digital skills and entrepreneurship. The European Social Fund Plus, the EAFRD and other European programmes contribute to make this happen.</p> <p>4. Measuring the progress towards closing the digital gap between urban and rural areas by showcasing relevant indicators, notably from the Digital Economy and Society Index, transformed in 2023 in the “State of the digital decade”.</p>

Support the roll-out of broadband in rural areas.	2022	Completed (support facility set up in April 2022) and continuing	Broadband Competence Offices (BCOs) are contact points in Member States or regions. They provide guidance and advice to broadband project promoters, investors, and users (local and regional public authorities, citizens, operators, businesses and any relevant stakeholder). A strengthened support facility supports the BCO network to improve rural broadband roll-out and facilitate investments.
Continue promoting the digitalisation of the agricultural sector through capacity building (including in digital skills), research and innovation, and demonstration including in the fields of Internet of Things, robotics and automation, big data management and use	2021	Ongoing since June 2021	The common agricultural policy (CAP) and Horizon Europe will continue to support the digitalisation of agriculture through, training, advice and innovation actions under the CAP and R&I actions under Horizon Europe.
Highlight urban-rural linkages in the new EU Urban Mobility Framework	2021	Completed (framework published in December 2021) and continuing	The Commission published the new EU Urban Mobility Framework, which includes specific actions to better integrate the urban, peri-urban, and rural linkages. This is done through further development of the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP), where dedicated attention goes to better support connectivity between rural, peri-urban areas and metropolitan/urban areas, via safe and sustainable mobility options.

Improve accessibility of rural areas through the Drone Strategy 2.0.	2022	Completed (strategy published in November 2022)	In addition to utility services (field inspections and measurements), drones can improve accessibility in remote rural areas. They can be used for delivery of small goods in rural areas (eg. small packages, prescribed medicine to patient homes, mail, food, small automotive parts, etc.). The European Commission published its Drone Strategy 2.0 taking these elements into account.
Resilient rural areas			
Flagship: Support rural municipalities in energy transition and fighting climate change	2022	Ongoing since 2022	<p>(1) The creation of the Rural Energy Communities Advisory Hub (New)</p> <p><i>There is now a significant role allocated to energy communities to contribute to reach our increased renewable energy targets and become independent from gas, oil, and coal imports. Rural areas hold great potential due to the space available to develop renewable energy projects. The Rural Energy Communities Advisory Hub (RECAH, 2022-2023) launched by the Commission empowered the development of sustainable energy community projects in European rural areas by providing technical assistance to citizens and authorities. The Commission is exploring follow-up activities.</i></p> <p>(2) The creation of synergies on rural areas in the Covenant of Mayors</p> <p>The Commission interacts with the Covenant of Mayors to explore the possible synergies with the rural vision and rural pact, such as the organisation of common events or activities, like the webinar organised by the Rural Pact Support Office in 2023 with the Covenant of Mayors, to exchange and disseminate best practices around the energy transition in rural areas.</p> <p>(3) Address rural areas in the New European Bauhaus</p> <p>The New European Bauhaus, which connects the European Green Deal to our living spaces by adapting buildings and public spaces, plays an important role in rural areas, where several projects are funded. The Commission is exploring the possible synergies with the rural vision.</p> <p>(4) The use of structural funding to finance the renovation wave</p> <p>Member States, regions and local authorities should further seize the opportunity to finance investments through territorial instruments of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD): Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI's), Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) and LEADER.</p>

Flagship: Climate action in peatland through carbon farming	2021	Ongoing since 2021	<p>Rural areas can become relevant actors in addressing climate change and restoring biodiversity. To that end, the provision of ecosystem services by farmers and foresters should benefit from further recognition. For instance, the restoration, rewetting and conservation of wetlands and peatlands has great potential in terms of climate benefits as it can deliver immediately significant emission reductions in a relatively small area, while at the same time delivering several co-benefits related to water management and biodiversity.</p> <p>This transition would be more effective with a territorial approach, in particular in those rural areas hosting extensive peatlands. These regions could make benefit from support under the Just Transition Fund. Carbon farming initiatives could be a further source of income for their farmers and foresters, rewarding them for carbon sequestration and protection.</p> <p>As set out in the Farm-to-Fork Strategy, and thanks to the Commission proposal for a framework regulation on certification of carbon removals, new rewarding schemes will promote carbon protection in peatland and wetlands. The CAP, the cohesion policy and the LIFE programme can provide support to develop pilot carbon-farming initiatives in their regions. Ensuring strong advisory support to farmers and foresters will be particularly relevant. This support is key to the success of environmental land management schemes involving farms of all sizes.</p>
Flagship: EU Mission 'A Soil Deal for Europe'	2021	Ongoing since June 2021	<p>The EU Mission 'A soil deal for Europe' funded under Horizon Europe is implementing an ambitious research and innovation programme, is setting up, 100 'living labs' involving researchers, farmers, foresters, spatial planners, citizens and other stakeholders (e.g. local authorities) and lighthouses (sites to showcase good practices) with the objective to implement innovative sustainable land management practices on the ground. The Mission is also contributing to the harmonisation of soil monitoring across the EU and to increase soil literacy and the general awareness on the importance of soil through communication and engagement activities. The mission contributes to tackle soil challenges in rural areas, but also in urban settings, building connections between rural and urban practices. Synergies are built with the other Horizon Europe Missions.</p>

Flagship: Social resilience and Women in rural areas	2021	Ongoing since 2021	<p>Support for women will keep being provided to entrepreneurship, participation in decision-making and investments in work-life balance services, such as early childhood education and care, as well as services for older people.</p> <p>There can also be opportunities to increase women's participation in the labour market, in particular in agriculture, under the common agricultural policy or the schemes and support of European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT).</p> <p>The Commission will continue supporting Member States' work on improving the availability, accessibility and affordability of quality education and care services for children, older persons and persons with disabilities in rural areas through the implementation of the Care Strategy, investments from the European Social Fund Plus, the European Regional Development Fund, the Invest EU programme and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.</p> <p>Special attention will keep being paid to people in vulnerable situation.</p>
<i>Analyse spatial mobility in demographically declining areas in Europe</i>	2021	<i>Ongoing – transferred to "stronger"</i>	<i>This action, delivered through three Horizon Europe projects, has been integrated in the flagship "Research and innovation for rural communities" under "stronger rural areas" to rationalise reporting.</i>
Prepare a study on the working conditions of agricultural seasonal workers	2022	Ongoing (study launched in 2023)	The Commission launched a study looking into the working conditions of seasonal workers in the agricultural sector. The study addresses the general situation of their working conditions in the EU, focusing on identification of applicable rules and regulations. The study will be published in first half of 2025.
Address the inclusion and integration of people with a migrant background in rural areas	2022	Ongoing since 2022	As part of the implementation of the Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027, the Commission will keep exploring options to build rural partnerships to promote inclusion and integration of migrants in rural areas.

Ensure equal opportunities to children in rural areas	2021	Ongoing since 2021	Ensure equal opportunities to children in rural areas by implementing the European Child Guarantee and providing children in need with free access to early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day, healthcare, and effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.
Address the needs of people with disabilities in rural areas	2021	Ongoing since 2021	By implementing the New Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 in collaboration with the MS, the Commission is supporting improved access to their rights in rural areas.

Prosperous rural areas			
Flagship: Entrepreneurship and the social economy in rural areas	2021	Ongoing since 2021	<p>The flagship promotes sharing and supporting experiences across the Single Market to revitalise rural areas through cooperation, best practice and knowledge exchange. A series of actions is proposed to enable industry entrepreneurs, SMEs and social economy organisations to return to, transform and thrive in rural areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develop SMEs in rural areas by favouring clustering, networking, and cooperation through the Single Market programme, COSME and European Enterprise Network; - promote social economy business models in rural areas through the European action plan for the social economy; - boost retail and local supply chains in rural areas by e.g. improving the interface of local producers and retail and creating local food hubs; and - creation and support of innovative environments in rural areas through educating and empowering future entrepreneurs to develop societal or business models and solutions that would cater for the needs of local communities, with the help, expertise, and service provisions of the EIT KICs.
Continue encouraging Member States to increase education, training and employment opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas under the reinforced Youth Guarantee and the European Education Area	2021	Ongoing since 2021	<p>The reinforced Youth Guarantee is a commitment by the EU Member States that all young people under 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship. As part of this commitment, Member States should address the needs of young people in rural and remote areas. Particular attention will keep being paid to making jobs and other opportunities available. The Commission monitors the implementation of the reinforced Youth Guarantee, including the progress in the situation of young people in rural areas.</p> <p>The Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 outlines the Commission's vision and foresees important initiatives to foster the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems, which will have an impact on rural and remote areas.</p>

Promote the development of a sustainable bioeconomy, including in the framework of the EU Forest Strategy and in the carbon-farming initiative	2021	Ongoing since 2021	<p>The Commission adopted a new EU Forest Strategy in July 2021 with a number of actions, including to plant 3 billion trees by 2030. This will provide opportunities for jobs and growth through forest restoration activities and will support farmers and rural communities in adapting to climate change, protecting their crops from more frequent adverse weather events (floods, droughts, heatwaves, etc.) and diversifying their revenues. A thematic group was organised -under the EU CAP Network (March to May 2023)- on supporting the needs of forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities: promoting a network under the EU Forest Strategy. The thematic group brought together representatives of and stakeholders from forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities across the EU to explore how to better support those areas and communities.</p> <p>The establishment of a Horizon European partnership, also enshrined in the EU Forest Strategy, is one of the key objectives to overcome the fragmentation of forestry research and innovation. The proposed partnership “Forests and forestry for a sustainable future” will be the main instrument of public organisations in Europe to join forces through concerted research and innovation from 2025 onwards.</p> <p>Through the implementation of CAP instruments, sustainable land and forest management practices and investments and cooperation related to bioeconomy and carbon removals are promoted. With regard to forest-dominant rural areas, CAP instruments may provide funding to e.g. stimulate innovation and business development for the rural bioeconomy, new employment opportunities and alternative bio-based products, protect biodiversity, contribute to the fight against climate change and enhance provision of ecosystem services..</p>
Highlight the role of Producer Organisations (POs) in rural development and strengthen producers group of geographical indications	2022	Ongoing since 2022	<p>POs can strengthen the social fabric in rural areas by offering their members a sense of belonging and by increasing the level of social capital and trust within the communities where they are based. They can contribute to increasing the standard of living in rural areas by securing jobs and livelihoods. POs not only directly employ people; they also indirectly help producers earn their living from farming. In this light, the Commission foresees the adoption of a Regulation on European Union geographical indications for, among others, wine, spirit drinks and agricultural products, and quality schemes for agricultural products in 2024.</p> <p>The Commission has organised and will keep organising mini-conferences to address the role of producer organisations and their contribution to rural development with the aim to promote the adoption of GIs.</p> <p>The Commission also developed a web-based toolkit for GI producers and has and will keep communicating actively with GI producers through fairs, events and specific outreach initiatives.</p>

Implementation of the rural action plan and governance *

<p>Enhance availability of statistics on rural areas through:</p> <p>(1) making available new detailed data collected in the 2021 round of population and housing censuses in the EU disseminated via the 2021 Census Statistical Atlas;</p> <p>(2) modernising the legal framework for European population and housing statistics.</p> <p>(3) developing Pan-European geospatial datasets</p> <p>(4) mainstreaming the degree of urbanisation</p>	2021	Ongoing since 2021	<p>The Commission will continue its work to reinforce statistical data collection and provision on rural areas.</p> <p>(1) While publications of demographic statistics at NUTS3 level in line with Regulation (EC) No 1260/2013 will continue, the 2021 round of population and housing censuses will provide detailed regional and local information, including collection of georeferenced population data at 1 km square grid level from all Member States for the first time.</p> <p>(2) The Commission has proposed a new framework regulation integrating population and housing census, demography, and international migration statistics and extending the data requirements towards their geographical detail to enhance the scope of statistics relevant for rural areas. The Commission works to adopt and implement this new legal framework.</p> <p>(3) The Commission will establish a harmonised approach on the use of Geospatial Information Systems, developing pan-European geospatial datasets (for example on public transport, education, health care etc.) and enabling the production of more georeferenced statistics and related indicators (like accessibility of schools, hospitals, etc.).</p> <p>(4) The list of indicators by degree of urbanisation will further expand as new datasets become available.</p>
Set up a rural observatory to bring together all data collected by the Commission on rural areas, including official statistics	2022	Ongoing since December 2022	<p>The rural observatory setup in December 2022 supports the knowledge production and aims at improving data collection and dissemination related to EU rural areas. It offers relevant statistics, indicators and analyses based on data from multiple sources and at the most appropriate territorial granularity, covering the economic, social and environmental dimensions.</p> <p>The observatory contributes to a better understanding of rural areas and it represents an important source of information for "rural proofing", to evaluate and assess the impact of EU legislative initiatives on rural areas, and to provide evidence for policy making in relation to rural areas development.</p>

Work on the definition of functional rural areas	2022	Completed (definition proposed end 2023) & continuing	The Commission has proposed a definition of functional rural areas in November 2023 and will continue discussing it with stakeholders and international organisations and explore the usefulness of this territorial typology for statistical and policy purposes in the long term.
Apply rural proofing notably to the Commission's major legislative proposals which affect rural areas	2022	Completed (mechanism set up in Nov. 2021) & continuing	A rural proofing mechanism has been created through the 'better regulation guidelines' adopted in November 2021. The Commission implements this mechanism to assess the impact of major EU legislation and initiatives on rural areas since 2022.
Propose a rural pact to national, regional and local authorities committing to address the specific needs of rural areas	2021	Completed (pact proposed in December 2021 and endorsed in June 2022) & continuing	<p>The rural pact has been proposed to the national, regional, and local authorities and stakeholders in December 2021 and the concept to make it operational, developed in concertation with other EU institutions and bodies and stakeholder organisations, has been endorsed at the rural pact conference in June 2022.</p> <p>The rural pact provides a framework for cooperation between public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia and citizens, at the European, national, regional and local level. It contributes to achieving the shared goals of the rural vision by facilitating interaction on rural matters. It aims at fostering mutual inspiration between all levels of governance and mobilising public authorities and stakeholders to act on the needs and aspirations of rural residents.</p> <p>More specifically, the three objectives of the pact are to amplify rural voices and bring them higher on the political agenda, structure and enable networking, collaboration, and mutual learning, and encourage and monitor voluntary commitments to act for the rural vision.</p> <p>The Commission acts as a facilitator of the rural pact through its contract (2022-2025) with the Rural Pact Support Office.</p>

Publish a toolkit on the combination of EU funds for the revitalisation of rural areas	2022	Completed in 2023 and published in February 2024	<p>The rural toolkit is a dashboard providing operational and practical solutions to rural stakeholders to make use of the opportunities offered by post 2020 EU Funds.</p> <p>It also provides (a) practical examples of innovative investments combining funding sources and getting better value for support and (b) links with methodological support for integrated territorial and local strategies under cohesion policy.</p>
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**Actions under this section were reordered compared to the initial EU rural action plan, to group the actions regarding statistics and data (including the rural observatory and functional rural areas) at the top.*